



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME TYPES OF PUBLIC SPEECH

LEVERETT S. LYON
University of Chicago

Public speaking still figures prominently in the intellectual bill of fare that is laid before the college youth. More and more is it becoming part of the curriculum—ranging from singing to carpentry—from which the adolescent boys and girls in high school must choose their work. In college, public speaking has the halo of tradition and antiquity. In high school it has the charm of novelty. At such a time, before its meaning shall have become established in the tax-supported high schools of the United States, it is pertinent to consider public speaking. What does it attempt? How does it attempt it? What are the results?

Now by public speaking I do not mean that species of emotional massage, such as “The Black Horse and His Rider,” “How the Gospel Came to Jim Oakes,” or “The Midnight Ride of Jennie McNiell,” that finds expression in dramatic declamation. Neither am I discussing political speaking. To some persons a composition of three cambric flags, a cold well settled in the throat, a blue pint pitcher marked ice-water, and a limitless capacity for shaking hands constitute an orator. To the same, four references to “the fathers” and the constitution, five to the flag and the party, and one to the awful flame of civil strife, which “fierce as breath from hell; in a single flash melted the shackles from a million slaves and forged the federation of the states,” constitute an oration. To be a thoroughly great speech these should be judiciously distributed about several epigrammatic but indefinite allusions to the platform and “the issues,” and the whole should be garnished with two quotations from the Bible and one from Lincoln.

The thing in which we are interested is scholastic public speaking. Is it doing what it should do for the student? Is it giving him the power to get results by oral discourse? The plan

of practically all schools at the present time is to use, largely for training and almost entirely for a test of efficiency, some type of oral contest. Does success in these contests mean efficiency in the student? I believe not. A student may have competed in every variety of contest known to the campus; he may have won firsts, blue ribbons, gold cups, honorable mention, and unanimous decisions, and never have convinced, persuaded, inspired, impressed, entertained, or otherwise affected one impartial audience in his life. All he has ever done is to receive the approbation of the "honorable gentlemen," the judges.

To be convinced that those forms of public speaking wherein "getting the judges" is the test are not a training in ability to accomplish any definite result in public speaking, let us with all fairness, and with due respect for age and the dignity of tradition, examine some of them.

Scholastic public speaking is, to use the allusion most familiar to knights of the ruler, commonly divided into three varieties. Number one is declamation. Declamation enjoys considerable popularity in most high schools and many colleges. To indulge in declamation the student must learn by heart, and repeat from the same vital source, the words of another. Usually these words of another are the words that have made that other famous. In this the declamation is likely to differ from the recitation of the elocutionist—although a relationship must be admitted. The elocutionist does not spurn the classics—often uses them—but neither does he, or more often she, reject the non-classics. A random grab from *One Hundred and One Best Selections* does as well for the elocutionist as "Sohrab and Rustum." "Hamlet's Soliloquy" is encored with "When Hezekiah Hid the Spoons." In declamation, however, the tendency is toward the reproduction of the world's great speeches. Obviously this type of work cannot be wholly bad. The question is, Is it wholly good? Is it the most valuable thing we may train the student to do?

If we are to gauge the speech only upon its effectiveness, its production of new vision, new belief, new feeling or action with the particular audience to which it is addressed, the declamation must be barred. Any of these results, in the sense in which the speech

was originally intended to produce them, are quite impossible with the declamation, because it has, in most cases, no possible bearing upon the audience which now hears it. Patrick Henry's "Call to Arms," an old-time favorite, was originally intended to get action—militant action against England. But it never was intended by Patrick Henry that this speech should get action against England from a group of well-fed, twentieth-century students, or from fathers and mothers of declaiming sons who, before the war, had no more fervent regard for England than an amused interest in the British suffrage movement, and who now regard England as an ally. Patrick Henry wished to get action from an audience who were vitally concerned, who had already "supplanted," "remonstrated," and "prostrated themselves before the throne without avail"; who, in short, "must fight."

Webster's reply to Hayne is a similar instance. This speech is admitted by all, not to *be*, but to *have been* one of the greatest speeches ever made. But it was not great because Webster used a magnificent vocabulary; because he "rounded out" graceful periods; or because he flashed wit, sarcasm, and epigram. It was great because *then* it said the things the North wanted said better than it seemed possible for anyone to say them. The issues which that splendid piece of work involved were settled by the war, and ever since we have been trying hard to forget that there ever were such issues. In other words, the reproduction of such speeches can be at best only exhibitions. They are splendid exhibitions, and we may show them with justifiable pride; but they are nevertheless only the relics of the great historical museum, and have the same effect upon the hearer that a trip to Mount Vernon or a view of General Grant's sword might have upon the sightseer. Even admitting what is seldom true, that the speaker has a thorough knowledge of the conditions which produced the speech and will therefore profit from it as an example, the fact still remains that if it is ever necessary to do it, to learn how it is done, he will not acquire the ability to get results in speaking much more rapidly by mouthing over the utterances of great men than he will learn to swim by sitting on the bank of a river and executing the breast stroke and the scissors kick in the air.

It is evident, then, that to expect the student to learn to affect an audience by repeating words which, pertinent though they were when uttered, have no application to present-day affairs, is hopeless.

Number two of the great triumvirate of academic courses in public speaking is oratory. This is the work in which each speaker writes orations. (This literary species is now practically extinct outside of scholastic circles.) In an oratorical contest the speaker may write upon any subject, and usually does. His favorite source of information is the files of former orations which have won similar contests. Here he often finds a theme and, frequently, "oratorical style." He was probably unacquainted with "oratorical style" before this time. Good English style had been sufficient for all previous purposes. Sad to say, the files not only furnish themes and "oratorical style," but occasionally they furnish material. This is, however, much more exceptional than finding material in "standard orations" with which declamatory work has brought familiarity. When the student has finished his oration it is given to the judges of thought and composition. There are several reasons why being a judge of thought and composition is not altogether an arduous and unpleasant task. Reading orations is not difficult, because orations are very likely to be much alike. This is partly due to the themes. It is partly due to the "oratorical style."

There is a certain rhetorical flavor that pervades them all. Another thing which makes being a judge of thought and composition a pleasant duty is that it is sometimes so sweetly reminiscent. One is almost sure to be reminded of other orations which he has read. Perhaps he can see the form of a Phillips climax, or he may recognize a paragraph from Burke on Chatham. And perhaps—yes, very often—if he wrote orations in his schooldays, he will find phrases of the old speeches coming back to tongue as he follows through the manuscript in his hands.

But these idiosyncracies of the student oration are merely amusing. Surely they are not faults. They are not faults if they are giving results. We can afford to be amused. But work in public speaking which is to command anything more than indulgent mirth must give results; it must give the student power to gain an

effect with a given audience; power to make the persons of that audience see more, believe differently, or feel or act otherwise than they would have felt or acted had nothing been said.

Can the oration give the student the power to get results? Does it put before him a definite task which he can understand and accomplish? If it appears in contest form, as it usually does, it is written to win the approval of unknown judges. Oh, horrible travesty upon realities! Every salesman, every lawyer, every politician who ever had one atom of success in talking to men, will declare that his success came primarily from a knowledge of the likes and dislikes, the affections and the prejudices, the gods and the taboos of the particular customer, jury, or crowd in every particular instance. To teach people to gain a result by having them write orations without knowing the persons to whom they must appeal is like teaching marksmanship to gunners by having them fire into the air. Brutus made the Roman mob listen, but Antony made them try to lynch Brutus. Brutus could have written a better "oration," but Antony knew the crowd.

But there is another type of public speaking in which the student is encouraged to indulge. This is debating. In my judgment this type of speaking is far less open to criticism than the other two. Nevertheless, though I have read debates, heard debates, lost debates, won debates, coached debates, and judged debates, I have almost never seen a debate so managed as to give the speakers any amount of power in affecting an audience. Occasionally a debate deals with a subject in which both the debater and the audience have a lively interest. When this is true the student has a splendid chance for development. There is only one thing in the way. That is the eternal judges. Were it not for the hideous necessity of talking to the judges, the speaker could address these interested persons just as he would at any other time. He could treat them like human beings with prejudices, bunion, votes for president, and fathers who served in the war. He could really try to make them, with all of these afflictions and blessings, believe as he believes. But what cares he for the audience? He must win the debate, and winning the debate means talking to the judges. To the speaker the judges are unknown. If he has by any chance discovered their names in

advance he feels guilty. They have been chosen because they are unknown—and moreover unknowing, so far as this subject is concerned. The one query to which every judge must answer “No” is this: “Do you know enough about this question to have a leaning toward either side?” So here again the speaker is not confronted with the conditions which he will meet after commencement, but with a supposedly colorless, bloodless, passionless, unknown quantity. However, it is usually true that the judge is none of these things. He is very much like the rest of us. Before the debate has gone far the “affirmative” has begun to tread upon the economic or political hobbies of one judge, while the other two are feeling flattered. When the “gentlemen of the negative” take the floor the opposite occurs. The result is a two to one decision for the negative. But the speakers are in no way to blame. They had no possible way to know how to handle the material so as to make every judge believe that his own ideas indorsed what the debaters would have him believe. In life this is the requirement. The task is to make persons agree with us. One way to improve debating is to increase the number of judges until their composite opinion represents the consensus of the opinion of the audience as a whole. This, of course, presents difficulties in contests between schools but is easy when debates are carried on in any one institution.

In spite of the fact that the speaker must try to talk to unknown judges, he usually works up no small amount of enthusiasm for his task when the crowd is really interested in the subject being debated. Under these circumstances he is likely to forget himself and the judges, and go in to convince the crowd. When he does, he is likely to get the judges in the general landslide. But unfortunately the listeners are too often not interested in the question. They came either to see what a debate was like (this class never repeats), or to show school spirit, or to cheer when the debate is over. Not always does the high school, or even the college, audience feel that it will be greatly edified by hearing other boys and girls argue that commercial reciprocity should be established between Canada and the United States or that the Chinese exclusion act should be repealed, or even that the high protective tariff policy of the United States is detrimental to the general welfare

(taken from suggested questions in a high-school text on debating).

Where the audience is not interested—cares no more which side is right than it cares whether Noah drove or coaxed the animals into the ark—it is plainly impossible for the speaker to make his efforts real.

If we can then, in debating, get subjects in which the audience is interested—the speaker generally becomes interested after long study of the question—have judges with human qualities, known to the speakers, and numerous enough so that they express something like the opinion of the entire audience, the student ought to find all work in public speaking enlivened by debate. He would also be learning to do what he must do when he leaves school if he dares to hope for success in any field of speaking.

What all of our schools—high schools and colleges—need is more work in motivated, extempore speaking. Extempore speaking does not mean unprepared speaking, or speaking of things of which nothing is known. It means speaking about something with which the speaker is well acquainted, and where there has been time carefully to plan method and arrange ideas, but where there is no definite set of words determined. Extempore speaking, then, means careful organization of ideas, but not careful or full-some preparation of words. And every speech should be motivated. It should be carefully directed to gain a certain result, with the particular audience taken into vital consideration.

Every student has plenty of material for practice without reading a word of reference. One is familiar with inside baseball, which he may attempt to make clear to others. Another is colored and has some unique views on the race question in which he may seek the belief of his classmates. A third is the yearbook manager and deems it desirable that the other students shall swell his profits or diminish his losses.

Practice in doing these things—effectively, making others see or feel or act as we wish them to—and using the material at hand without writing or memorizing, is eminently practical, because it is just what men do with speaking every day. The occasions for formal speaking are now very limited. On the other hand, the occasions where the short, pointed oral presentation of material

can be made to count are constantly increasing. In the chambers of legislation it is no longer the three-day speech of the time of Burke, or even of Webster, but the talk in the committee room that brings results. The bank director in his board meeting, the alderman in the council, the demonstrator to his customers, all rely upon the rapid correlation of material which they have thoroughly in mind, but for the expression of which no definite set of words has been established.

Such speeches must be and are adaptable. The salesman, the classroom lecturer, the lobbyist, would all be in a laughable position if they could not vary their form of presentation to meet any exigency that arose. The ideas will not be changed, but they must be dressed to meet the demands of the minute. Where the memorizing speaker is more than hobbled the extempore speaker is free to meet changing conditions.

But someone will say, "This is not public speaking. This is oral theme work—learning clearness, argumentation, and the like. If we make public speaking mean this, what is to become of the grand old art of oratory?"

This objection need not seriously disturb us. If we can teach a student to explain *now* to a non-athletic class how some signal play in basket-ball is worked, we may be sure that ten years from now he can make a non-philosophic class understand the intricacies of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. If *now* he can make a class believe that the honor system of examinations would be a wise adoption, trust him, when he is as familiar with the subject, to make a commission believe that his particular plan of tariff tinkering is an advisable one. If he can get more students out to a public speaking or athletic contest *now*, he has acquired the ability, when he desires that end, to get more voters out to the polls and to get the crosses in the right squares.

In other words, if the student, using material with which he is familiar, can get a desired result *here* and *now* with *this* audience, he can, using material with which he is *then* familiar, get a desired result *then* and *there* with *that* audience.

If he can get results, we are willing that the audience, now or then, go home without saying, "What a splendid speech!"